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Voices of Resistance and Reflection: Ghalib and Marx-Engel's Narratives on the Revolt of 1857

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Abstract:
The Revolt of 1857 was a pivotal event in Indian history, marking a significant challenge to British colonial rule and the decline of the Mughal order. This research paper examines how Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib, a prominent Urdu poet and eyewitness in Delhi, navigating personal and cultural upheaval in Delhi, and Karl Marx, a Western theorist analyzing global imperialism, interpreted the Revolt of 1857. Mirza Ghalib documented the revolt's impact in his Persian diary Dastanbuy and personal letters, blending pragmatic loyalty to the British with private critiques of their brutality.Karl Marx and Engels's journalistic from London for the New-York Daily Tribune, analyzed the revolt as a national uprising against British imperialism, offering a systemic critique rooted in his anti-colonial and materialist framework. By analyzing their works the paper explores their distinct yet interconnected voices of resistance and reflection, revealing the revolt's personal, cultural, and systemic dimensions. Comparing these narratives- one personal, literary, and culturally rooted; the other theoretical, journalistic, and global- provides a unique lens to explore how diverse voices interpreted the same historical crisis. This study bridges literature, history, and political theory to reveal the multifaceted nature of resistance and reflection during colonial upheaval.
Keywords: Revolt, Ghalib, Dastanbuy, New-York Daily Tribune

1. Introduction

The Revolt of 1857, often hailed as India's "First War of Independence" by nationalists and dismissed as the "Sepoy Mutiny" by British colonial historians, stands as a pivotal moment in the subcontinent's history, challenging the hegemony of the British East India Company and reshaping socio-political landscapes. This uprising, sparked in Meerut and engulfing Delhi and beyond, was not merely a military rebellion but a complex interplay of cultural, economic, and political grievances against colonial rule.

Amidst this tumult, two distinct voices emerged, offering profound yet contrasting narratives: Mirza Ghalib(1797-1869), an Urdu-Persian poet in Delhi, and Karl Marx (1818-1883), a revolutionary theorist in London. Ghalib, a witness to Delhi's siege, captured the revolt's chaos and cultural devastation in his Persian diary Dastanbuy and private letters articulate a reflective, ambivalent resistance rooted in personal survival and cultural loss.Marx, analyzing the revolt from afar through his articles in the New-York Daily Tribune, framed it as a national uprising against British imperialism, exposing colonial oppression with a revolutionary lens. Marx'sarticles offer a revolutionary critique of colonial power, together providing a nuanced understanding of the revolt's significance.

This paper examines how Ghalib's introspective, ambivalent narrative and Marx's systemic, radical critique together illuminate the Revolt of 1857's multifaceted significance, revealing personal and global dimensions of resistance and reflection. This paper also examines that how do Ghalib's and

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Marx's narratives of the Revolt of 1857 reflect their unique perspectives on resistance, colonial oppression, and societal change? By comparing Ghalib's localized, survival-driven account with Marx's universalist, anti-colonial analysis, this study argues that their narratives, though rooted in divergent contexts, converge to enrich our understanding of the revolt as both a cultural tragedy and a structural challenge to empire.

2. Mirza Ghalib's Narrative

During the Indian Rebellion of 1857, Ghalib1 was 62 years old and although he was associated with the court of the Mughal ruler, he had been a pensioner of the East India Company until 1820, but lost that privilege due to a family dispute. Later in 1860 his pension was restored after the suppression of the rebellion. Ghalib's loyalties were divided between the company and the ceremonial court before the Rebellion even began.

Dastanbuy: His views of the Rebellion are therefore influenced by his dual identities: being associated with the Muslim nobility and his reliance on the East India Company. He was witness to the revolt's violence and the Mughal dynasty's collapse. Ghalib recorded the accounts of fifteen months (1857-58) and wrote what he personally witnessed in Persian prose and the document was later named Dastanbuy(which means 'nosegay' or a small bunch of sweetly scented flowers)and became quite popular. Eighteen months after the start of the fighting, Ghalib published Dastanbuy, his memoirs of the suffering brought on by the conflict, sending copies to various British officials, including Queen Victoria, both to plead for moderation in the treatment of Indians and to establish his own innocence in the rebellion.

Dastanbuyis a literary artifact of colonial transition, blending history and poetry.His Dastanbuy along with important letters he wrote to Munshi Hargopal Tafta, provide the most important evidence about Ghalib's approach to chronicling the rebellion in his interpretation. Dastanbuy chronicles Delhi's siege, rebel rule, and British reconquest. Mirza Ghalib in his narratives publicly aligns with the British, e.g., intending to present the diary to colonial authorities, yet subtly critiques their disruption of order. Ghalib inhabits a unique position in interpreting the turmoil in Delhi in 1857. The diary contains two main fragments: the first part covers the period when Ghalib was under rebel forces, while the second part focuses on the time when Delhi was recaptured by the British. Despite being a poet and writer in a feudal setting, Ghalib knew this was the only way to protect himself from the power-ups. The purpose was limited to influencing the authorities.

The Dastanbuy was part of such a category, and as such he was able to protect himself in this manner. Not only Mirza Ghalib but every Muslim elite needed to create a place for themselves in the emerging new order in light of the harsh treatment they received from the British after the takeover of Delhi and the subsequent retaliations. The Diary of Ghalib represents a new way of dealing with British power based on the rule of loyalty. It reflects the impact of this new power structure. Ghalib's account highlights, therefore, the very extraordinary nature of Muslim society after the Rebellion, as the outcome of the Rebellion was primarily a political tragedy. While avoiding direct blame on the British, Ghalib tells us about the everyday struggles of the people by being thoughtful of his word choice. Seeing the mass-slaughter and the rebellion, the truth inadvertently slipped out from Ghalib who actually condemned the sepoys at the beginning of the uprising.

MirzaGhalib's main focus in the diary Dastanbuy is to narrate the eye witness account of the loot and plunder of Delhi either by the rebels or by the military forces of the East India Company. Mirza Ghalib expresses his sorrows, "For you this is only a sorrowful story, but the pain is so great that to hear it the stars will weep tears of blood."2MirzaGhalib's criticism of the revolutionaries was more upon the fact that he had sensed a defeat of the revolutionary forces at the hands of the British as the rebellion was neither well-organised nor powerful enough to counter the military might of the foreigners. The other reason was the anarchy, loot and plunder of the Delhites by the revolutionaries

of the Revolt. Otherwise in his letter to his friends he was very sympathetic to the people of India with much caution.

The metaphor Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib invokes to describe the dire situation in Delhi during the Revolt of 1857, "The heart is not stone or steel but will be moved. The eyes are not lifeless cracks in a wall but will shed tears at the panorama of death and at India's desolation. The city of Delhi was emptied of its rulers and peopled instead with creatures of the Lord who acknowledged no lord, as if it were a garden without a gardener, and full of fruitless trees.[3]

After the British victory, they suspected the Muslim population of Delhi of sympathising with the rebels. Many of them, including Ghalib, were rounded up for waging war against the British. The Dastanbuy, published in 1858, was thus a way for the poet to 'seek the shelter of the Lord from these unwarranted arrests.'But he could not stop himself from grieving the attack on his fellow residents, even if it was done by his patrons. He says in his diary, "Their (the British) anger at the citizens of Delhi was so great that, after capturing the city, one would think they would leave not even a dog or a cat alive.[4]

Even though in the Dastanbuy Ghalib sided with the British, he could not ignore the violence that both sides had unleashed on his beloved city. For Ghalib it was Delhi and its mohallas (localities) that suffered. The mushairas (poetry gathering) of the Qila-e-Moalla (Red Fort), the hustle-bustle of the streets of Chandni Chowk, the sellers and merchants who were the life of the city, were all gone. Ghalib wondered if Delhi was anything without them, "Delhi meant the Fort, the Chandni Chowk, the daily bazaar near Jama Mosque, the weekly trip to the Jamuna Bridge, the annual Fair of the Flower-sellers. These five things are no more. Where is Delhi now? Yes, there used to be a city of this name in the land of India.[5]

Ghalib's Letters: Mirza Ghalib wrote many private letters to his friends in which he criticized the British brutality. Ghalib talked of the 1857 revolution in many of his letters which portrayed the pain and sorrows that he had felt. Among his Urdu letters written during the war of independence, many were addressed to the ruler of Rampur, a friend and benefactor of Ghalib. As the letters contained some political advice and spoke on the aftermath of the revolution, apparently not too sympathetic or reverent towards the revolt and the Mughals, Ghalib had requested that the letters be destroyed once read.However, he was careful enough not to say anything that could offend the British.He expressed in his letters the personal grief for friends, patrons, and loss of Delhi's cultural refinement. However, interestingly, his numerous letters to his friends, in which he wrote more freely, indicate that the poet was as angered by the British as the rebels.

In this letter, he writes of British cruelty towards the inhabitants of Delhi. In the words of Ghalib, "Five armies, one after the other, invaded the city : first was the army of rebels which robbed the citizens of their reputation; second was the army of khakis (British) who plundered life, property, honour, home, sky, earth and every remnant of life; third was the army of famine at the hands of which thousands perished; even those who were fed were struck down by the fourth army of cholera; the fifth was the army of fever which sapped the endurance and strength of the people[6]

In a letter written to Alauddin Khan, Mirza Ghalib wrote that in Delhi, a reign of terror prevailed. He continues, "Today every British soldier is an autocrat. While going from house to bazaar, the heart of a man fails him. The Chauk is a slaughter house and my house is like a prison-hole and all of Delhi's dust is thirsty of Muslim blood. Should we meet, we would complain of body, heart and soul. In anger we would complain of the fire of hidden wounds and we would weep and tell tales of weeping eyes, O Lord! such meeting would not wipe from the heart the scar of separation.[7]

Ghalib writes the brutality of British soldiers, "trembling old men were cut down, harmless citizens were shot, clasping theirhands for mercy or blown to bits by guns. Tens of thousands of men and women and children were hounded out of Delhi to wander homeless over the country in mournful processions. Ghalib, however, stayed in the city and waded through this ocean of blood. He was reduced to poverty- without money, without clothing, without pension, without a record of his

poems.[8] His insane brother Mirza Yusuf Khan was shot dead by the British soldiers, a fact which he has concealed in his diary. Muinuddin Hasan has a different story to tell, "Mirza Yusuf Khan, brother of MirzaAsadullah Khan, who had long been out of his mind, attracted by the noise of the firing, wandered out into the street to see what was going on; he was killed."9 The treasures and belongings of Ghalib were ransacked and looted. He was questioned, suspected of high treason and of being in league with the rebels and accused of composing a versified sikka for the Mughal emperor.
Saddened, Ghalib writes to Majruh on the second of December, 1858, "Brother, what do you ask? What can I write? The life of Dilli depended upon the Fort, the Chandni Chauk, the daily gatherings at Jami Masjid, the weekly walk to the Jamna Bridge and annual fairs of the flowermen. When all these five things are no longer there, how can Dilli live? Yes, there was once a city by this name in the dominions of India Only three Muslims remain: in Meerut, Mustafa Khan; in Sultanji, Maulavi Sadruddin Khan; and in Ballimarran, this worldy dog known as Asad- all three rejected, ransacked destitute and despairing. When we have perforce broken our cups and goblets what if rose water rains from the skies.[10]
In his narratives Mirza Ghalib uses a reflective tone, blending loyalty to the British for survival with mourning for Mughal heritage. His resistance to the British was ambivalence, critiquing colonial violence indirectly while adapting to new power structures. He gave more emphasis on personal and cultural loss, grounding the revolt in lived experience. Ghalib's narrative reflects the Muslim elite's struggle to adapt to colonial dominance, prefiguring later nationalist movements.

3. Marx-Engel's Narrative

Karl Marx,the German philosopher and economist, analyzed the revolt through historical materialism, using British sources critically.Very interestingly, Karl Marx or Engels had never been to India, and they had no contacts with the Indian insurgents. They did not have at their disposal even a fraction of the details available today and had to rely almost exclusively on the British press and parliamentary reports, which were extremely biased against the mutineers. And even from these scanty and partial facts they laboured to dig out the truth in a very convincing way. They narrated the progress of the struggle not as passive observers, but with the optimism of participants.

Karl Marx viewed the revolt as part of global anti-imperialist struggles. In his articles in the New-York Daily Tribune, from 1857-59, he frames the revolt as a "national revolt" against British oppression, rejecting the "mutiny" label. He criticizes British atrocities, e.g., arguing sepoy violence was a response to colonial cruelty, and exposes torture as a colonial tool. In his articles, he highlights the revolt's structural significance, e.g., the native army as a unified resistance force.Karl Marx observes that in pre-Revolt India, a population of 200 million was thus kept in submission by a native army of 200,000 officered by Englishmen and kept in check by an English force of 40,000.11 While narrating the Indian Revolt of 1857, Karl Marx adopts the revolutionary tone, advocating systemic change and situating the revolt within global anti-colonialism.

Marx and his friend Engels refuted the false contention of the British ruling classes, who tried to picture the insurrection as an armed sepoy mutiny and to conceal the involvement in it of broad sections of the Indian population. They laid special emphasis on the revolt bringing together not only people of different religions and castes but also of different social standing. Marx proved beyond doubt that broad sections of the people, the peasants most of all, took part in the insurrection in a direct or indirect way. Marx describes that it was the first time that sepoy regiments have murdered their European officers; that Musalmans and Hindus, renouncing their mutual antipathies, have combined against their common masters; that disturbances beginning with the Hindus, have actually ended in placing on the throne of Delhi a Mohammadan Emperor.[12]

Marx opines that the present Indian disturbance was not a military mutiny,but a national revolt, of which the Sepoys are the acting instruments only.Karl Marx has the reason of calling the rebellion as the national revolt because of participation almost all Indian social sects and the people of all

religions participated in this Revolt. Marx describes the unity of different regions like Hindu and Musalman against the British by quoting the Bombay correspondent of London Times, "The cavalry regiments of the Punjab force contain many Musalmans and high caste Hindus, from Hindustan proper, and Rohilkhand, while the Bengal Irregular Cavalry are mainly composed of such elements. These men are, as a class, utterly disloyal, and their presence with the force in any numbers must be embarrassing, and so it has proved.[13]

Karl Marx writes that the rebellion spread throughout Hindustan; in 20 different places simultaneously, sepoy risings and murder of the English; chief scenes: Agra, Bareilly, Moradabad. Sindhia loyal to the "English dogs", not so his "troopers", Rajah of Patiala- for shame!-sent large body of soldiers in aid of the English.[14]

Engels (Friedrich Engels, a German philosopher, economist, historian, and socialistand collaborator of Karl Marx) writes that after thefall of Delhi, the war in India is gradually passing into that stage of desultory guerrilla warfare which was next impending and most dangerous phase of development. The insurgent armies, after their successive defeats in pitched battles, and in the defence of towns and entrenched camps, gradually dissolve into smaller bodies of from two to six or eight thousand men, acting, to a certain degree, independently of each other, but always ready to unite for a short expedition against any British detachment which may be surprised singly.[15]

Engels writes that the whole district from the Himalaya to the Bihar and Vindhya mountains, and from Gwalior and Delhi to Gorakhpur and Dinapore, is swarming with active insurgent bands, organized to a certain degree by the experience of a twelve months' war, and encouraged, amid a number of defeats, by the indecisive character of each, and by the small advantages gained by the British. It is true, all their strongholds and centres of operations have been taken from them; the greater portion of their stores and artillery are lost; the important towns are all in the hands of their enemies. But on the other hand, the British, in all this vast district, hold nothing but the towns, and of the open country, nothing but the spot where their movable columns happen to stand; they are compelled to chase their nimble enemies without any hope of attaining them; and they are under the necessity of entering upon this harassing mode of warfare at the very deadliest season of the year.16Engels further writes that the present, the British have reconquered India. The British themselves confess that among both Hindus and Musalmans, the hereditary hatred against the Christian intruder is more fierce than ever. Impotent as this hatred may be at present, it is not without its significance and importance.[17]

Conversation between Mirza Ghalib and Karl Marx:

Karl Marx was very much influenced with the poems and philosophy of Mirza Ghalib and after the suppression of the Revolt, Marx requested Mirza Ghalib to write something to appeal labourers of all over the world to get united. Karl Marx wrote to Mirza Ghalib:[18]

Sunday, April 21, 1867
London, England
Dear Ghalib,

Day before yesterday I received a letter from my friend, Engels. It ended with a couplet that impressed me very much. After much effort, I learnt that it was written by some Indian poet named Mirza Asadullah Khan Ghalib. Brother, it's wonderful! I had never envisaged that revolutionary feelings for independence from slavery would ripen so early in a country like India! Yesterday, I got some more poetic works of yours from a Lord's personal library. The couplet is highly appreciable!:

Hum ko maloom hai jannat ki haqeeqat lekin,
Dil ko behlane ko Ghalib ye khayal achha hai.
(I know paradise does exist, But, Ghalib! It's good to console your heart.)

In your next edition of poetry do write in detail addressing workers: "Landlords, administrators, and religious leaders sap your toil's rewards by taking you to the fanciful world of

paradise." Rather, it would be nicer if you write some lines on: "Duniya bhar ke mazdooron, muttahid ho jao (World labourers, get united.)"

I am not well aware of the Indian style and poetic treatment. You are a poet, you write something substantive being under poetic restrictions. Whatever, the sole purpose is to invigorate the masses with its message. Moreover, I would advise you to quit composing leisure writings like ghazal or quatrain and move over to free verses so that in least time you can write more and the more you write the more the wretched people would have to read and mull over.

I am dispatching the Indian version of the Communist Manifesto along with the first volume whose translation is unfortunately not available. If you like it, next time I will send you some more literature. At present, India has been converted into a den of the English imperialists. And only the collective effort of the exploited and downtrodden masses or workers can liberate them from the clutches of the perpetrators.

You should study the modern philosophies of the West than the outmoded and unworkable thoughts of Asian scholars; and do not write the fables and praises of the Mughal kings and nawabs and create the literature that takes up the revolutionary cause of the masses. Revolution is imminent. No force in this world can restrain it. That time is coming soon when the tradition of guru and disciple will fade away.I wish India a steady path toward revolution,

Yours,
Karl Marx

On receiving the letter of Karl Marx, Mirza Ghalib replied:[19]

September 9, 1867

I received your letter along with the Communist Manifesto. How would I reply? First, it's too difficult to understand what you talk. Second, I have grown too weak to write as well as speak. Today, I wrote a letter to a friend, so, I thought of writing to you too. Your view about Farhaad (reference in Ghalib's one poem) is mistaken. He is not any worker as you perceived him. Rather, he was a lover but his perception toward love did not impress me. He was lunatic in love and would think of committing suicide all the time for his beloved's sake. And you talk of which inquilab (revolution)? That is a past, ended ten years ago! Now the Britishers roam broad-chested and everyone eulogizes them here. The discipline of royalty and lavishness has become a thing of the past; and the tradition of guru and disciple is losing its charm.

If you don't believe, pay a visit to Delhi and see all in flesh and blood….. And that's not confined to Delhi only, Lucknow's essence too is disappearing…where have those mannerisms gone…where are those gentlemen! Now, you predict of which revolution?And in the middle of your letter I also learnt you talk of changing the mode of poetry writing. Mind you, poetry cannot be created but it comes to you naturally. And my case is distinct. When ideas flow in, they just merge into any forms, ghazal or quatrains. I believe, Ghalib's style is unmatched in the world of poetry, and because of that, the kings have already gone and you want me to be deprived of the nawabs and patrons who take care of me…

What goes wrong if I say a few lines in their praise!

What is philosophy and what it has to do with life, who knows better than me? My dear, which modern thinking you talk about? If you are interested in it, you better read Vedanta and Wahdat-ul-Wajood. And stop just harping on thought after thought, if you can, do some work in this direction…you are an Englishman, do me a favour. Please convey a recommendation letter to the viceroy, requesting for reissue of my pension….

Now I am feeling very tired. So, I am putting an end to it,
Humbly yours,
Ghalib

4. Comparative Analysis

The Revolt of 1857, often termed India's First War of Independence, was a pivotal event in Indian history that elicited varied responses from contemporary thinkers. Mirza Ghalib, the renowned Urdu poet, and Karl Marx, the German philosopher and economist, provide two distinct perspectives on this uprising. Ghalib, a Delhi resident and eyewitness, documented the revolt through his Persian diary Dastanbuy and Urdu letters, while Marx analyzed it through articles in the New-York Daily Tribune, viewing it through a lens of anti-colonialism and class struggle. This comparative analysis explores their perspectives, focusing on their motivations, interpretations of the revolt's causes and nature, and their views on its consequences, highlighting the interplay of personal experience and ideological frameworks.

Ghalib's Dastanbuy attributes the revolt primarily to the actions of "rebellious soldiers" from Meerut, whom he describes as "faithless to the salt" (disloyal to their British patrons). He emphasizes the immediate trigger- mutinous sepoys entering Delhi on May 11, 1857, and their subsequent violence against British officers. His diary focus on sepoy disloyalty aligns with his need to appease British readers.However, his letters reveal a more complex view, mourning the loss of Delhi's tehzeeb (culture) and critiquing British reprisals, such as the exclusion of Muslims from the city unless they paid a fee. Ghalib's depiction oscillates between condemning the rebels' violence and lamenting the broader devastation, reflecting his emotional attachment to Delhi and his pragmatic need to align with the victors. His letters hint at a broader understanding, acknowledging the disruption caused by British policies and the rebels' destruction of Delhi's social fabric. Ghalib's perspective is less about systemic causes and more about the revolt's immediate impact on his city and personal life, reflecting his position as a cultural observer rather than a political theorist.

Marx and Engels offers a structural analysis, viewing the revolt as a "national revolt" rather than a mere sepoy mutiny. He identifies British colonial exploitation- economic plunder, heavy taxation, and cultural insensitivity- as the root causes. Marx notes that the revolt began with sepoys, who were "clad, fed, petted, fatted and pampered" by the British, but argues that their rebellion reflected deeper discontent among peasants, artisans, and other oppressed groups. Marx's analysis frames the revolt as a response to the contradictions of British capitalism, which unified India's diverse groups against a common oppressorideology.

Above all, Ghalib's interpretation is narrow, focusing on the revolt's immediate actors (sepoys) and events in Delhi, likely due to his need to avoid antagonizing the British. Marx's is expansive, situating the revolt within a global anti-colonial and anti-capitalist framework. Ghalib's account lacks the systemic critique that Marx provides, reflecting their differing roles: Ghalib as a poet navigating personal survival, and Marx as a theorist analyzing structural oppression. However, Ghalib's letters suggest a latent awareness of broader disruptions, bridging the gap slightly with Marx's systemic view. Ghalib's letters reveal sympathy for Delhi's residents. Marx justifies the revolt's violence as a natural response to colonial brutality, critiquing British hypocrisy. Both, however, recognize the revolt's intensity, with Ghalib lamenting its cultural toll and Marx celebrating its anti-colonial potential.

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